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ABSTRACT

This case study illustrates and expands upon the principle that innovation efforts involve both role change and change in role interrelationships, changes that (ideally) will be supportive of the innovation effort, but which may--if duplication, gaps among roles, or tension arise--weaken or destroy the effort. A planning effort in the Cleveland (Ohio) Public Elementary School System necessitated the release of teachers from regular class assignments for planning sessions. It was decided to hire a team of "support teachers" to regularly replace the planners in the classroom, rather than to hire an ever-changing, inexperienced group of substitute teachers. Conflict between the team of support teachers and the regular class teachers arose due to: (1) the deliberate emphasis on the fact that the support teacher was a "specialist" rather than "ordinary substitute"; (2) the expectation of support teachers for "good" lesson plans to be supplied by the classroom teachers; (3) the expectation that support teachers were to implement lesson plans, despite any reservations they may have about their adequacy or appropriateness; (4) differences in teaching styles; (5) inability to match exactly the support teacher's previous experience with the classes needing a support teacher; (6) issues surrounding the assumption of noninstructional tasks; and (7) escalation of individual members' problems to the group level (support teachers vs. regular teachers). Methods applied to the resolution of these tensions are described. (MJB)

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ROLE INTERACTION: THE SALT IN THE SOUP

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I. INTRODUCTION

Innovation efforts by nature entail changes in the way things are done. These changes, when carried out in an institutional setting, further involve changes in the roles of those who are part of the change effort as well as changes in their role interrelationships.

Ideally, the evolving network of roles will form a durable, flexible fabric to support the innovation. However, increasing tension, duplication or gaps among roles can seriously weaken or destroy the innovative effort.

The present paper is based on knowledge gained through personal involvement in an innovation effort in a large urban school system. More specifically, the paper addresses the dynamics associated with the role interaction of some of the key change agents.

The innovation effort being reported was grounded in the belief that the primary change agents within a school are the persons who staff that school. To release these energies, each of six elementary schools organized a planning team consisting of four to six teachers and the principal. During the course of the 1976-77 school year, each school team devoted a two-hour weekly session to team planning. The initial weeks focused on systematic training in planning, leading to change actions (or "miniprojects") designed, implemented and evaluated by the team members. A project manager served as a facilitator--conducting the training sessions and providing support and assistance for the teams' efforts. Resources from within the school system--subject matter specialists, research support

--as well as the assistance of outside consultants were available to the teams. Primary funding support for the change effort was provided by the George Gund Foundation.

A key resource provided to the project through the Cleveland Public Schools was the services of a team of six support teachers. The support-teacher team assumed the instructional responsibilities of the classroom teachers in order to release them for their weekly two-hour planning session conducted during school hours. The support teachers had previous experience teaching elementary grades and had demonstrated both a high level of instructional competence and a willingness to assume the support teacher role. The decision to select experienced teachers for the support team (rather than inexperienced--and less expensive--teachers) was based on the awareness that the effectiveness of the planning/change effort by the classroom teachers would be diminished if not destroyed if chaos reigned during the weekly two hours they were away from their classes. It was anticipated that provision of an experienced teacher who would "cover" the same classes throughout the year would provide continuity of instruction, reduce the adjustment on the part of the pupils, and add an enriching influence to what might otherwise be a continuously changing series of substitute teachers.

The present paper addresses the issues and outcomes of the first year of operation (1976-77) of the planning and support-teacher teams, and focuses on the role definition and interaction among the support-teacher team and the planning teams of classroom teachers. The paper further discusses the steps taken (in the following year's change effort) to alleviate the problem areas.

II. OVERVIEW OF CONTEXT FACTORS

The support teachers were selected from an applicant "pool" of teachers with experience in elementary schools. Prior to the selection, interviews were held with each of the prospective team members to explain the support-teacher role and duties. The explanation emphasized the challenging variety of school and classroom settings in which the support team would work during the year, the advantages (and disadvantages) of the semi-itinerant status of the team members, and the relatively untested dimensions of the venture.

As a team member, the support teacher was to assume the regular instructional duties of the classroom teacher while the classroom teacher was engaged in a planning session. The typical week's schedule of a support teacher would involve nine different classroom groups in six schools on a continuing basis throughout the year. In turn, each of the classroom teachers was expected to transmit an adequate lesson plan for the support teacher's use. The title "support teacher" reflected a sensitive issue: the support teachers were not to be viewed as "ordinary substitutes". Rather, their background experience was to enable them to maintain and enrich the instructional momentum in the classrooms in which they served. The six support teachers were selected from those applicants who expressed willingness to join the team.

For reasons of expediency, responsibility for coordinating the support-teacher team was assigned to the Division of Research and Development. A member of the Research and Development staff served as the coordinator of the support team and was responsible for scheduling their assignments, monitoring their activities, maintaining close contact with the project manager, and handling routine matters such as payroll, procedural questions, etc.

Prior to assuming their duties in the classroom, the support teachers completed a series of orientation sessions. The orientation included a visit to each of the six schools--to meet the principal and become familiar with the school plant and procedures. In some--but not all--of the schools, there was also an opportunity for the support teachers to have a brief meeting with the classroom teachers whose classes they would be covering.

During both the orientation phase and the remainder of the year, the support teachers had informal workshops with various subject-area supervisors and curriculum specialists. Although all of the support teachers had prior experience in teaching in elementary schools, most of the teachers' experience was associated with a specific grade or level (e.g. primary) rather than with every grade. It was not possible to "match" each support teacher's assignment to a classroom at the grade or level congruent with the teacher's previous experience.

Throughout the 1976-77 year, the support teachers had weekly meetings with the team coordinator (from Research and Development). These meetings provided the opportunity for the support teachers to discuss their questions and concerns and made it possible to identify areas in which clarification and action were necessary. In addition, the project manager (who was working with the planning teams of classroom teachers) maintained close contact with the support-teacher coordinator and frequently attended the support teachers' weekly meetings.

Because of funding delays, the selection of the support-team members took place during October, 1976. The team orientation began in mid-November, 1976, and team members assumed classroom duties during the latter part of the same month.

III. ROLE INTERACTION ISSUES THAT EMERGED

As the planning activities progressed and both classroom and support teachers assumed their respective and complementary roles, various issues emerged.

1. The deliberate emphasis on the fact that the support teacher was a "specialist" rather than "ordinary substitute" generated inordinate expectations among some of the classroom teachers. Some expected the support teacher to be a "miracle worker" equipped to magically convert the most recalcitrant student and most disorderly class into enduring models of learning behavior.

2. The support teachers expected the classroom teacher to transmit "good" lesson plans. Some of the lesson plans (in the support teacher's opinion) left much to be desired, and generated reactions of indignant shock among the support teachers.

3. The support teacher was to implement the classroom teacher's instructional plan--not radically restructure, arbitrarily replace, or "correct" the procedures in the teacher's plan. Plans which support teachers viewed as inadequate or inappropriate resulted in frustration.

4. Differences between teaching styles of the support teacher and the classroom teacher created tension. Since each felt responsible for the learning progress of the pupils, each tended to have serious concerns about approaches other than the one they preferred.

5. While assuming classes at a grade different from the support teacher's experiences was considered an opportunity to expand experience, it necessarily resulted in some tension based on the support teacher's lack of thorough familiarity with the curriculum for the "new" grade.

6. Assuming the "regular duties" of the classroom teacher sometimes included non-instructional tasks--field trips, collecting lunch monies, etc. On occasion, support teachers bristled, feeling they were being put upon. In turn, classroom teachers viewed such reactions as a "prima donna" posture.

7. Group identity emerged quickly among the support teachers. Progressively greater evidence of mutual support and concern appeared. This served as a positive force in generating cohesion. However, it also tended to escalate an individual member's problem to the level of a group concern... and to magnify it in the process.

The outcomes of the first year of the support-teacher operations underscored the impact of a pervading factor in conflicting role expectation: both the support teachers and the planning team of classroom teachers were engaging in new and untried activities. In the process, members of each group were revealing their teaching competence to members of the other group. Initially, at least, the support teacher and the partner classroom teacher were strangers. To protect their perceived vulnerability to criticism from a peer, both the support teachers and the planning teachers tended to exaggerate the expectation attached to their counterpart and, as a group action, to minimize or justify any deficiencies attributed to themselves.

Planning for the current (1977-78) year incorporated modifications to avoid or at least reduce tension and defensiveness between the planning and support teams. A key modification was the allocation of more time to the orientation phase. The orientation activities were expanded to provide a full-day session in each school during which each support teacher-classroom teacher pair could become acquainted in an informal, non-threatening setting. The "get acquainted" phase further enabled the support teacher to spend time visiting and assisting in the classroom of the planning-team teacher during a half-day of regular classroom instruction (before the actual program began).

It should be further noted that, at the close of the first year (1976-77) of the support-team operation, each of the six support teachers

expressed the desire to continue as a support-team member during the following year. The 1977-78 support team was expanded to nine members, four of whom had been part of the 1976-77 team. This core of experienced team members was an important internal resource in orienting the new team members and in helping clarify day-to-day issues as they arose in the field.

An additional modification was the designation of one of the nine 1977-78 team members to serve as a field coordinator. (This field coordinator had participated as a team member the previous year.) Through the field coordinator, procedural needs such as schedule adjustments could be handled on site without delay.

In summary, the use of a support-teacher team proved to be a workable way to release teachers for planning sessions and still maintain continuity of instructional momentum. Problems in relationships between support and classroom teachers were generally the result of distorted role expectations heightened by tension and insecurity in the new roles. Provision of adequate time for developing personal relationships proved to be an important factor in easing role adoption.